



Literature

Émile Verhaeren

The Only National Poet Belgium Has Ever Had

If someone were to be nominated as the greatest Belgian of all time, it would surely have to be Émile Verhaeren (1855-1916). He was a man who wrote in French but who was regarded as a Fleming; and who died in the First World War as a staunch defender of gallant little Belgium. A poet with his boots on, fighting for the cause, indefatigably mounting the barricades for his fatherland; last bastion of civilisation in the face of the Teutonic barbarians; falling to his death under the wheels of a train at Rouen station in France, uttering the perfectly cast last words: 'Je meurs...ma femme... ma patrie' ('I am dying...my wife...my homeland').

In these famous last words, which are almost certainly apocryphal, Verhaeren's love for his wife, for whom he had created the monument *Les Heures claires* in 1896, goes hand in hand with his love for his homeland. They are appropriate words for a 'symbolic' death: a man who sang the praises of the leviathans of the New Age was crushed to death by one of those very machines. There can surely be no doubt, then, that this was the greatest Belgian of all time. Except that Verhaeren's name did not even appear on the 'Flemish' list of 111 nominees a few years ago in the quest for the greatest Belgian. And on the list of French-speaking Belgians, his name languished in a very modest 67th place.

Flemings who write in the French language fall between two stools today: too Flemish to be French-speakers and excluded by those who believe that 'the language is the nation'. It is unlikely that Verhaeren ever knew the Dutch language. Some remnants of the Flemish from his childhood may possibly have remained, the language spoken with other boys in the streets of his childhood village of Sint-Amands on the River Scheldt, and at village fairs; but there will not have been much of it, and the Jesuit priests at the Sint-Barbaracollege school in Ghent will have done a thorough job of eradicating what little there was. At the same time, Verhaeren's French was regarded in Paris as ex-

modern Dutch, and also of the English language, where the contribution from Dutch - amongst other languages with a significant influence on English - has been seriously underrated.

Both books come with an exemplary scholarly apparatus of references, notes, bibliography, and index. Both also contain uncommon illustrations regarding their subjects - maps, letters, paintings, poems, manuscripts, the Dutch house on Canvey Island, the Dutch Church in London and Huygens's Dutch translations of John Donne. And both were published within a few months of each other, in prestigious book series, by two of the most reputable academic publishers in the Netherlands.

Not many researchers can pull off such an impressive double act. But Christopher Joby, who is Assistant Professor in the Department of Dutch at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea, just went and did it.

We owe him a great debt of gratitude for these two new and fascinating standard works.

REINIER SALVERDA

Christopher Joby, *The Multilingualism of Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687)*, Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age, Amsterdam University Press, 2014, 350 pp.

Christopher Joby, *The Dutch Language in Britain (1550-1702). A Social History of the Use of Dutch in Early Modern Britain*, Brill's Studies in Language, Cognition and Culture, vol. 10, Brill, Leiden, 2015, 451 pp.

otic and savage, but it would be wrong to think that Verhaeren learned French late or with difficulty. At home, the Verhaeren family spoke French, and the priests trained him well. Verhaeren's idiosyncratic idiom is more likely to have been a deliberate stylistic device: 'une incorrection volontaire' ('a deliberate inexactitude'), as his biographer Jacques Marx claims.

We now know the truth. The young state of Belgium, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1880, sought its legitimacy against its large French neighbour by giving itself a glorious 'Flemish' past. *Les Flamandes* ('The Flemish women'), Verhaeren's debut published in 1883, fitted in perfectly with this strategy. If we are to believe Jacques Marx, Verhaeren also deliberately chose this Flemish identity, constructing it rather than emanating from it. For Verhaeren, Flanders was a literary market segment that he could feed with the landscapes of his youth: the broad, meandering River Scheldt, the heavy, pregnant skies, the 'solid beauty' of the women of Flanders, were all given a place against the backdrop of the mystique and sensuality which it was now obligatory to ascribe to Flanders - the two extremes of the fleshly and the pious. Flanders was a splendid alibi for Verhaeren. He was a Fleming, but one who preferred to be outside Flanders.

In his biographical essay from 1910, Stefan Zweig consecrated Verhaeren's position within the still young and prosperous Belgian nation. Verhaeren was nothing more or less than the very incarnation of the nation; proud of his Flemish roots and at the same time in the vanguard of industrial progress. The Belgian race was powerful, vital and sensual, active and industrious. Verhaeren, with all his contrasts, epitomised that: he was a child of the city and an inhabitant of the earth; Catholicism and socialism fought for supremacy within him. He was the prophet of the 'Belgian soul', the

bell-ringer who had earlier called on the people to defend their territory and who now exhorted them to realise their own power with conscious pride.

But perhaps Verhaeren's literary strategy was not quite so deliberate. He may simply have had a flair for good timing. There are writers who are ahead of their time or who lag behind it. And there are writers who express their time, because they coincide with it or happen to be on the crest of the wave when it rolls over the beach. Verhaeren falls into this latter category. It may be that this makes him literally 'dated', in the sense of inextricably linked to a particular moment in time. What is in any event beyond dispute is his extraordinary capacity for empathy, for sharing in the suffering and the emerging forces of his time.

He became the first bard to sing the praises of the brutal grandeur of the factories and the spreading tentacles of the towns which were swallowing everything in their path. He was at once fascinated and horrified, but also saw that human progress could only come from the towns and cities. This was where masses of people, misery, movement, experience, labour, industry, science, revolt and



Theo Van Rysselberghe, *The Lecture*, 1903, Oil on canvas © Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent.

Émile Verhaeren is wearing a bright red coat. Some of the other participants: Maurice Maeterlinck (seated first from right),

Félix Fénéon (leaning on the mantelpiece) and André Gide (head in hand, across from Verhaeren).

ideas came together. The clashes between them would give birth to the future, to a new world and a new earth. 'Le monde est trépidant de trains et de navires' ('The world is pulsating with trains and ships'). It is no surprise that the futurist Marinetti saw a forerunner in the Verhaeren who wrote *Les Villes tentaculaires* (1895).

Verhaeren's maturity as a poet in the 1890s brought the wide circulations and the fame. His work was read in Paris and in London, and the meeting with Stefan Zweig in 1902 opened the eyes of the German world to his oeuvre. Zweig did more than anyone to spread Verhaeren's fame in Europe. His biography of the poet was published in 1910 and was immediately translated into French.

Verhaeren was now frequently away from Belgium. He had lived in Paris since 1899, giving rise to the revealing comment: 'Je m'exile pour que la nostalgie de mon pays m'inspire mieux' ('I have exiled myself so that nostalgia for my country will inspire me the more'). He toured Germany and Russia, where he was even recognised in the street, delivering lectures on 'la culture de l'enthousiasme' which virtually became his trademark.

When war broke out in 1914, Verhaeren was ready for his final role. No *Innere Emigration* for this artist who wanted to express *his* time, who wanted to *be* his time. And this was a time which reeked of nationalism and militaristic hysteria. This European realised the bankruptcy of his humanitarian ideals and became an ardent patriot who discovered that he hated Germany. This convinced internationalist, who had once been the cultural conscience of Europe, had become a blinkered nationalist. When the Belgian King Albert I summoned the poet to De Panne, behind the front line, Verhaeren inspected the Belgian troops in the company of the royal couple. The rebellious poet, who had long been poet laureate, now became a propagandist who would serve his country and his sovereign as a loyal vassal.

Yet the artist that Émile Verhaeren was, can't easily be claimed; not as a symbolist, an anarchist; nor a monarchist or socialist, nor as a troubadour

for Flanders. His genius lay in his ability to connect, whilst remaining rooted firmly in the local, with the great ideas and ideals of the time, and in some cases to initiate those ideas himself.

He was perhaps the only - and certainly the last - national poet that Belgium has ever had. But in order to become that, he could not survive the First World War. Belgium saw its finest hour between 1914 and 1918, its first and last transcendental moment in its more than 180 year history. Abroad, Belgium evoked admiration (Gallant Little Belgium) and sympathy (*La Belgique martyre* - The martyrdom of Belgium). The monarchy - the glue which bound together the structure of Belgium - also enjoyed its strongest period at this time, with its Knight-King watching over the nation, and with the poet laureate standing at his side on the beach at De Panne. But by 1918, that momentum was gone for good.

Verhaeren died at the right time, then. And he knew that the River Scheldt would remain faithful to him. In 1927 his body was returned to the place of his birth, the riverside village of Sint-Amands. He now lies there together with his wife beneath a black granite sarcophagus, for all the world standing ready to sail up the river at any moment like a container ship. It is worth a visit.

LUC DEVOLDERE

Translated by Julian Ross

English translations of some of Emile Verhaeren's oeuvre may be found in *Poems of Emile Verhaeren: Selected & Rendered into English by Alma Strettell, with a Portrait of the Author by John S. Sargent* (1915), Cornell University Library, Ithaca (NY), 2009, 106 pp.